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Instructional Support Teams (IST) and the IST Problem Solving Approach

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Instructional Support Team (IST) training is an initiative of the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) designed to develop school-based teams of professionals who support classroom teachers' efforts to assist struggling learners. The mission of instructional support is to provide students who are at risk of school failure with the necessary academic, behavioral, communication, and/or social supports to succeed in school. This effort is accomplished through collaborative school-based teams in which the shared expertise of team members is focused on empowering teachers to meet the individual needs of students. A well-trained and committed IST precludes the need for special education classification for some students and facilitates the inclusion of students who required special education services in general education classrooms. The intended outcome of IST is a more instructionally responsive school for students and teachers alike.

The philosophy of IST is based upon the following seven principles:

- All students learn.
- The critical arena for success is the student-teacher relationship within the general education classroom.
- A problem-solving community is the foundation for professional and student learning.
- The instructional match and setting is the focus of problem solving.
- Early intervention is preferable to waiting for failure.
- Teachers, as professionals, are entitled to the opportunity to consult and collaborate.
- Change is a process, not an event.

Effective ISTs consist of an administrator, general educators, a special educator, the school psychologist, a guidance counselor, and additional support personnel such as a reading specialist or the school nurse. A full-time Instructional Support Teacher leads the team. These professionals receive extensive training through the VDOE in the following areas:

- IST philosophy, mission, beliefs, and goals
- Process of complex change
- Case management model - roles and responsibilities of IST members, components of the IST model, and instructional consultation process and skills
- Interpersonal skills - communication, problem solving, facilitation, and team process
- Content skills - curriculum based assessment, systematic observation, task analysis, and data collection, record keeping, analysis, and reporting

Once IST members have been trained, they begin to accept requests for assistance. When a teacher requests assistance, the following sequence of events occurs:

1. The IST teacher assigns case management of the request to an IST member.
2. The IST case manager meets with the requesting teacher to explain the consultation process and ascertain the teacher's commitment to the process.
3. The case manager collaborates with the teacher to frame the student's academic problems in observable terms, prioritize these problems, collect baseline data, and establish a time frame for closing the instructional gap.
4. The case manager meets with the teacher to share and/or design appropriate instructional interventions. The object of these interventions is to match the student's instructional level to effective teaching and learning strategies that will correct identified skill deficiencies. Often the case manager shares strategies learned during IST training and models them at the teacher's request.
5. The teacher implements the proposed interventions with the student.
6. The case manager and teacher evaluate the success of the intervention/s. If interventions have been unsuccessful, they return to Step 3. The case manager may also request additional assistance from other IST case managers.
7. If the problem is resolved, the case is closed.

The success of Virginia's Instructional Support Team (IST) initiative is predicated upon each team member employing a systematic process of problem solving. Problems are viewed as the result of an inadequate match between what the student knows and needs, the task to be learned, and the instructional management strategies (Gravois & Gickling, 2002; Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996).

In order to create an instructional match, the IST problem-solving process attempts to answer five basic questions.

1. What does the student know?
2. What can the student do?
3. How does the student think?
4. How does the student approach what he/she is unsure of?
5. As a teacher, what do I do now?

(Gravois & Gickling, 2002)

The IST problem-solving process consists of five stages: contracting, problem identification and analysis, intervention design, implementation and evaluation and follow-up/redesign/closure. The following case study describes these five stages:

1. **Contracting:** A third-grade teacher, Ms. Peppy (P.), requests assistance from the IST teacher with a student, Cheri, who is experiencing both behavioral and academic difficulties. The contracting session provides Ms. P with an overview of the instructional problem-solving process. The IST teacher advises Ms. P that this process requires a commitment to work for a period of time (3-6 weeks) and confirms Ms. P's willingness to participate.

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2. **Problem Identification and Analysis:** In the process of clarifying her description of what Cheri knows and can do, Ms. P. reports that Cheri correctly completes her work in math and is less disruptive during that period. However, when Cheri is unsure of her answers, she immediately calls for the teacher's help, gets out of her seat, and talks to other students. This typically occurs during reading and language arts. The teacher also relates that Cheri was in a Title I reading program in first grade. Based on this information, Ms. P. and the IST teacher begin to establish that Cheri's behavior problems are most likely to occur during reading and language arts. They hypothesize that Cheri may be dealing with reading materials more challenging than she can handle. In order to develop a clearer picture of the exact nature of Cheri's problems, the IST teacher suggests a curriculum-based assessment (CBA) that examines Cheri's reading skills in her current instructional materials. The assessment component may also include an error analysis; task analysis; classroom observation; functional behavioral assessment (FBA); interviews with teachers, students, and parents; and/or an instructional environmental analysis. The assessment is completed through a collaborative effort between the IST teacher and the classroom teacher. The IST teacher conducts a CBA in reading with Cheri with Ms. P. observing the process. In addition, Ms. P. collects writing samples based on class reading assignments, arranges a classroom observation by the IST teacher, and schedules a meeting with the Title I teacher. The problem identification and analysis stage always involves collecting data to further refine the description of the problem(s) in observable, measurable terms. The CBA revealed that although Cheri could decode words accurately and had grade-level listening skills, her fluency rate was similar to that of a first-grade student (30-70 words per minute). Her problem with fluency appeared to interfere with her comprehension. Cheri was unable to retell a story orally even with guided questions. As might be expected, her writing samples were vague and disjointed. The classroom observation confirmed her out-of-seat behavior and her tendency to talk, both of which occur more frequently during the

reading and language arts lessons. The Title I teacher reported that Cheri could decode words and apply phonetic skills, albeit rather laboriously.

3. **Intervention Design:** After a clear, identifiable problem is defined, that is, a gap between current and desired performance, the IST teacher and the classroom teacher integrate the data collected with best practices and current research to design appropriate interventions. If other students might benefit from the same intervention(s), group or whole-class interventions are designed. In Cheri's case, fluency strategies were developed to increase her rate of reading and to enhance comprehension in her present reading level. Mrs. P. and the IST teacher used trial teaching to determine the efficacy of the strategy(ies).
4. **Implementation and Evaluation of Intervention:** The IST teacher supports the classroom teacher in ensuring that all aspects of the intervention are put in place. Depending on the needs of the target student and other students in the class, the IST teacher may model instructional strategies or the classroom teacher and IST teacher may co-teach a whole-class lesson using the interventions. These teachers collaboratively decide what the interventions will look like, who will implement them, and the frequency with which they will be used. Evaluation methods are selected in order to track the student's progress. The IST teacher assists the classroom teacher in establishing a baseline, as well as charting and analyzing data over the period of the intervention. With the help of the IST teacher, Ms. P. tracked words per minute (wpm) read on new material and subsequent re-readings in order to assess Cheri's progress. In addition, the numbers of correct responses to comprehension questions were also charted.
5. **Follow-up/ Redesign/ Closure:** The IST teacher and classroom teacher review the progress toward the established goals. If adequate progress is made and the teacher is comfortable in continuing to implement the strategies, the case is closed until the teacher has another concern. If progress is not made, the process may loop back to intervention design or even problem identification.

The Virginia Department of Education

continues to establish additional IST model sites throughout the Commonwealth. All schools involved in this initiative receive intensive training from consultants Todd Gravois, Ph.D. and Edward Gickling, Ph.D. Monthly follow-up assistance and support are provided on site by T/TAC specialists at The College of William and Mary, Virginia Commonwealth University, George Mason University, James Madison University, and Radford University.

The Virginia Department of Education also provides funds to purchase training materials and to defray a portion of the IST teacher's salary for three years. For more information about the IST initiative contact T/TAC William and Mary specialists **Denyse Doerries, Ph.D.** (757-221-1927 or dbdoer@wm.edu) or **Dale Pennell** (757-221-1708 or dppenn@wm.edu).

References

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- Rosenfield, S., & Gravois, T. (1996). *Instructional consultation teams*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- The Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC) of the College of William & Mary is part of a statewide network funded by the Virginia Department of Education. A variety of request-based support services and assistance is provided to educational professionals serving school-age students with mild/moderate disabilities in Eastern Virginia. The goal of these services is to improve student education through enhanced professional practice. Informational services are available to parents through access to the lending library and website and receipt of the quarterly newsletters. Services to educational professionals and parents of students with disabilities are generally free of charge and tailored to meet the identified needs of the requestor. Such services include informational services, workshops, lending library, consultation services and long-range planning projects. Visit the TTAC website at www.wm.edu/ttac for additional information.